

# Ayahuasca and Shamanism



Michael Taussig  
interviewed by  
Peter Lamborn Wilson





Santiago curing a boy of fright.

Shamanism and Ayahuasca: Michael Taussig interviewed by Peter Lamborn Wilson

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## Shamanism and Ayahuasca:

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PLW: I wanted to begin by asking you why you did what you did — Why you went to Colombia in the first place—your deep motive—if any?

MT: My first visit to Colombia was September 1969. I went to join the Revolution as a dogmatical doctor of medicine — which I was! I wanted to have my cake and eat it; I wanted to join the Revolution but I wanted the Revolution to be friendly to me and comfortable. I also went as a budding doctoral student from the University of London. In my naiveté and self-aggrandizement I thought I could be both a revolutionary and a doctor at the same time, I mean a Ph.D. doctor. But when I got to Colombia I quickly realized how totally out of my depth I was, how much violence there was amongst the guerilla, with whom, in my idiocy, I thought I could just walk into some office somewhere and sign on. I hadn't realized how violent and how difficult it was. A scene of some fifteen shades of gray. I hadn't really appreciated the physicality of the danger or the immensity of the commitment that was required. I went there as a '68 person, very absorbed in the struggle against the war in Vietnam and very taken up with anarchist culture, which I'd imbibed in Sydney.

PLW: Were you already an anthropologist?

MT: No. I came to anthropology *after* Colombia.

PLW: Ah!

MT: I was interested in sociological theory, in Marxism, leavened with some nineteenth century European anarchist theory, which I knew pretty well. But England turned me more into a Marxist

and then the Vietnam War, etc., turned me in to what we called in those days a Maoist: — the Third World would enclose the First World, the countryside would enclose the city. A bunch of us at the London School of Economics sort of fanned out, to the Third World, particularly to Latin America. I chose Colombia because I always liked these sort of ornery places where it seemed that something fantastic was about to happen, a social revolution that has gotten off the rails; Colombia had disintegrated into the famous *violencia* of 1948. So drugs and shamanism were far from my mind. Or anyway shamanism!

PLW: Had you ever thought to read or study anything about those subjects?

MT: What I was acquainted with was something about drugs—meaning marijuana and LSD—and the anarchist component of leftwing Marxism, a fascination with what Marx and the Marxists called "consciousness"; that's what I got out of the Situationists in Strasbourg and Paris. And the sort of upbeat optimism of Ché Guevara's book on guerilla warfare—i.e., that you didn't have to wait for the material conditions for the Revolution but you could make them. That sort of spontaneous leftwing Marxism which was something that had been very much at the center of debate in Europe with leftwing and rightwing versions of Marxism at each others' throats. So there was a way in which this leftwing Marxism ("infantile communism" as Lenin called it) was really a gateway to thinking more about what Marx thought about consciousness (a very labored term). Wasn't consciousness

really the trigger to everything, in Marxism as well as other social and political theories? And once you're on the consciousness track—how are people thinking? how am I thinking about thinking?—then it seems to me, it doesn't take much of a push or effort to start getting interested in the world opened up by drugs and shamans. So admittedly within my paradigm, when I arrived, that interest in consciousness was already there. So I imagine it was fertile ground in which shamanism could—years later—become a wonderful part.

PLW: Did you go back to school eventually to become an anthropologist?

MT: No. It was sort of a fluke. I had trained, like many other people, in the subject that seemed most with-it in the 60s, which was sociology. Now, I did the British variety, which was very different to what they were teaching in America (we needn't go into that). I wanted to study the "violence" in Colombia. This was term used for a discreet historical period beginning in the 40's and lasting ten, fifteen years. I have very many different thoughts about it now than I did then. I was in a rural area in the south of the Cauca Valley, just south of Cali.

No one knows the difference between sociology and anthropology, but they're very different disciplines. Some people say sociology is the study of the metropole and anthropology is the study of the colony. But in my case I was very intrigued, during the one or two months I spent in the United States on my way to Latin America, by the works of anthropologists who'd worked on the topic of peasant revolution, which was a subject close to my heart due to my nineteenth century anarchist reading—particularly the Russians. So I felt it would be good to work with some of those people in the States. It seemed to me to be a branch of social inquiry that (remember the Vietnam War) was extremely urgent as well. So it was of great interest both theoretically as well as in practical

terms. I was also very intrigued by student culture and the culture of the United States in the late 60s. So I was in no hurry to go back to England, though I still thought of it as my final destination. I wrote a couple of people in the States, people who worked in anthropology departments, and one of them invited me to come and teach for a year. So that job developed into a permanent job—but I'd never really read anthropology. I learned it as a teacher—not necessarily very fair on the students!

PLW: And all this while you intended to return to Colombia?

MT: I was very attached to Colombia, so when I got a contract to teach more in the U.S., I insisted on returning there and kept moving back and forth between Ann Arbor and Colombia.

PLW: Then you wrote *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism* as your first venture in anthropology?

MT: That was 1980.

PLW: So a full ten years had passed, of going back and forth to Colombia...

MT: Longer than that. In the 80's I switched to halftime teaching so as to spend more time there. I can't afford to do that now! I'd say I spent maybe a third of my time in Colombia.

PLW: What adventures led you to the scene of *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*?

MT: Let me try to do justice to that particular transition. A confluence of things. For one, the simple physicality of my situation. Working in the hot flat valley, I used to look up at the mountains, always covered with beautiful clouds, intrigued, wondering what was beyond them. I knew there were different people, I knew that was where the "real anthropology" was. Because real anthropology for most people is Indians or Native Americans in mountains or forests where 90% of anthropologists had spent their time, right? So all sorts of rea-

sons. Why do I always end up in weird places like these plantation towns and peasant hamlets in the agribusiness valleys where you can't drink the water, no toilets, mosquitoes, hot, ugly; a rural slum! I enjoyed it greatly but I always thought, one day I should do the "real" anthropological thing. And then there was the physical beauty, or so one imagined, in the more unspoiled parts up in the mountains or beyond them.

The second thing was: my interest slowly developed from the study of the history of the Valley—based on slave labor... I lived in a town that was essentially black. My interests moved from history to the consideration of attitudes, let's say, components of culture—in which I thought one could detect a different non-capitalist relation to wealth and the product of nature, its cultivation, or to nature in general. I was intrigued by stories about the Devil in relation to wealth and nature as the country moved from peasant society to wage labor society on sugar cane plantations. So—slavery till 1851; then a free black peasantry that seems quite sure of itself and its political clout. The country was riven by civil wars, the state was weak, so the peasantry had power. The end of those civil wars was around 1901—the War of a Thousand Days—decisive Conservative Party victory—the state comes in strong—the white landowners come back—the black peasantry is put on the defensive, and by the time of the Second World War, 1950, sugar plantations are in place, the peasantry is rolled back, becomes a wage labor force. That was the history I was studying, particularly the latter component. Out of that movement of a free peasantry to wage labor force (of course it's always more complicated than the simple way I'm putting it) I was intrigued by the figure of evil, the Devil. I magnified it and simplified I guess, but I had a fascinating meta-physical problem there and I detected a couple of things. One was the role of wandering Indian medicine men who would come to the market twice a

week, and about whom people told legends and stories. I met a mulatto medicine man who told me he had a great friend who was an Indian medicine man who brought this strange stuff to him. They were actually growing it in his *finca*. It turned out to be yagé. I didn't have a clue what he was talking about, but he came in one day and said he'd taken this medicine and seen a bunch of angels and stuff like that. I was told this was bullshit, this guy was a bullshit artist, everybody laughed at him. He happened to be my landlady's father. Guy without an arm, his photograph is in the book, name was Chucho Jiménez. He was a terrific guy, I hung out with him a lot. These angels—I didn't have a clue what he was talking about. This was 1971.

PLW: Despite the fact that you'd had some experience with LSD...

MT: Yeah, right. So I went out to his farm and looked at his stuff. Thousands of bottles of medicine in various stages of decomposition. He was such a cool guy, very eccentric, strange fellow. The picture in the back of the shamanism book'll give you a good idea of what he looked like.

The Indian medicine men like the one he'd hung out with are very defensive and cany and hard to get to know, too used to being ogled—but that's actually how they get their power and reputation, by being exotic weirdos. But that made them difficult and complicated to talk to.

The other thing I was interested in was—I was developing a theory that magic in Colombia, if not in other places, had an awful lot to do with fantasies about otherness. Whites would project magical powers onto blacks, blacks would project magical powers onto Indians, Indians would project magical powers onto blacks, etc. It was like a triangle that never stopped. It meant that you both esteemed the other but also put them down. The two sides of racism. That's a very powerful idea actually; it applies to the relations between male

and female, black and white, and so on, in our own society right here in the U.S. too.

So these two things sort of ran together...the wandering Indian medicine men, and secondly the nature of the magic involved; it gradually began to dawn on me. Now in certain societies like the United States, Enlightenment middleclass culture prevails, the word "magic" drops out, it's just called racism. It's a bad thing, shouldn't do it. People might come up with complex psychological, psychoanalytical theories. But the notion of a magical component is irrelevant if not inaccurate. But when you come into a peasant society where amongst certain strata of the population a magical vocabulary is important then you see it in this other way. So when I'd worked through some of this stuff in the Cauca Valley, which is an agribusiness valley—roads, banks, movie theaters—I wanted to explore the ramifications of what I was now seeing as a network of racial attribution. I'd had a friend who'd worked with the Siona-speaking Native Americans of the Putamayo region of Colombia. I went up with her to Puerto Asís, the biggest port on the Putamayo River in the Southwest of Colombia where it forms a border with Ecuador, and further down river, a border with Peru. A big, big area, thousands of square miles—the area that the U.S. is going to fumigate or bomb the hell out of any day now, targeted on the coca fields. When I went there in 1972, as far as I know, there was no coca.

PLW: In fact all that cultivation there is fairly recent, is it not?

MT: Originally Peru and Bolivia, and gradually made its way into Colombia.

PLW: I'd like to return to this point you brought up: a contrast between a society where magic is in the open and is tied up with racism or "racial thought"...

MT: Discreet otherness. Alterities.

PLW: Would you say that in our society this still remains absolutely the case, except that we don't have the vocabulary to discuss it?—or would you say that there's a real difference?

MT: I hesitate to come up with a glib answer. My suspicion: it's the same thing in both situations. But the magic in the U.S.... gets translated out. I'm a great believer—now—in the force of language. I don't believe simply that if you change a word you change reality. But I do think if there is a linguistic hiatus or vacuum there are definitely powerful repercussions on cultural understanding—and reality—but I'm not quite sure whether it's language or something else.

PLW: One thought I've always entertained is that because we don't have a vocabulary in which to discuss this persistence of magic we're more the victims of "black magic" than a culture where things are faced openly and discussed in specific terms.

MT: A very good point.

PLW: I don't think that magic goes away. I'm not trying to be metaphysical here—not talking about magic as ...

MT: ...guessing the lottery...

PLW: ...but about the fact that there's an irreducible level of consciousness or unconsciousness (or the relation between the two) that for want of a better word we could call "magic"—and it never goes away... the Ogre of Megadeath... atom bomb as Devil... these are very real "archetypes"—if I can use that word without being accused of Jungianism—and sometimes it seems to me that so-called "primitive" societies can deal with such things better than we can because at least they're discussing them up front and out in the open.

MT: Let me tell you a strong thought I have on this,

which is related to the difference between my book on shamanism and a book I published in 1997 called *Magic and the State* which is based on field-work at a “magic mountain” in the middle of Venezuela. Now these were to me very contrasted situations. I loved working in the Putamayo; it must be the highlight of my life. I *hated* working in Venezuela and I especially hated this type of “State magic.” My feeling, both at the beginning and now, was that the Putamayo “magic” (especially including the Indians but to a lesser degree the colonists, the poor white peasants) took everything with a grain of salt. They certainly believed that there are spirits, that yagé opens up a window into the world of spiritual power. But they saw everything in very complicated ways. You never knew if what you were seeing was really right or wrong or was an illusion. The mind could play tricks, yagé could play tricks, the shaman could play tricks. Shamans were human like anybody else, they could try to kill you, they could have a bad time, they could be greedy, they were trying to kill each other, they could turn on their patients or “students”, etc. So you never quite knew what the deal was. And basically there was a lot of humor. If you read Andrew Weil on the Putamayo, one of the things I noticed he emphasized, if you hang out with these medicine men, they giggle and laugh all the time. It’s really very true. Especially lowland shamans. Whereas the magic I saw at the Magic Mountain in Venezuela—people driving up in beat up old Chevis—people who lived in cities... Venezuela’s a far more “developed” country—you can buy all the conventional things—washing machines, hot water systems, etc.—petroleum-rich for decades. These people were “blindly superstitious” and their magic had (in my mind) no complexity. More importantly no in-built skepticism. They were like glassy-eyed zombies.

PLW: Victims of magic rather than masters...

MT: I wanted to insert this into your remark—that if there’s a language of magic and people can talk about it up-front they can deal with it better—and I was thinking that in the Venezuelan case, which I would think of as more “modern” magic, but then I don’t really mean that—because everything’s modern, it just takes different configurations in different parts of the world. But how to typify that Venezuelan stuff, which is really very common in third-world cities now? Perhaps I’m exaggerating the Putamayo—perhaps it’s a unique case—but I do not think so. So there is a difference there. One struck me as a very healthy attitude, and the other as something silly and morbid. It fit in so perfectly, the Venezuelan stuff, with the “magic of the State.” These people were suckers! And you can see it now with this guy Chávez, who struts around invoking the spirit of Simon Bolivar. Chávez to me (and an author rarely experiences such moments) is testimony to whatever was good in that book, *The Magic of the State*. It sort of predicted that someone like Chávez would come and steal the thunder of the magic, of powers of resistance, of anti-colonial movements, of the dead, of the martyr, all that nonsense.

PLW: How would you characterize the difference between the two types? Is the Venezuelan magic in transition to secularity—has it lost its power to heal?

MT: No! Not in transition to secularity. I think that the ineffable or mysterious qualities of power, in the case of Venezuela, have congealed into State formation. But instead of the language of bureaucracy or Enlightenment reason (as we often typify this mode of thought) at the popular level it’s absorbed this original, mystical quality. It’s not in transition to secularization. It’s more like they’ve magnified the mysticism that in fact exists in all modern states.

PLW: Looking at deep history, the origins of civilization, wouldn't you say that shamanism always gets betrayed into becoming the magic of the state, i.e., religion? Ideology?

MT: I don't know enough history. I guess I fight shy (maybe it's the cheap and easy way out) of macro-historical schemes. I've always had a big distrust of archaeology. What little I know of it comes from Latin American studies. Very suspicious of the schemes whereby archeologists construct narratives from hunter-gatherers to, say, the Inca or Aztec or Mayan state. I see too many assumptions, too many jumps and breaks. I can't accept a lot of this... if history means constructing a narrative or story over so many thousands of years, it makes me nervous. Maybe we could reconstruct the question.

PLW: Make it a structural rather than historical question.

MT: My tendency would be to look for an a-synchronic a-historical, more a-structured account—whereby what you and I seem to mean by the word “shamanism” exists in a particular type of society—and state religions exist with states. I'd prefer not to try to show a transition.

One line I'd be interested in discussing might be the distinction made by old Mircea Eliade (I sort of laugh at it) between shamanism and spirit possession. He makes a big deal out of it.

PLW: In shamanism one goes out of the body to the spirits; in spirit possession the spirits enter into your body...

MT: It sounds silly—but it occurs to me that in Venezuela it's all spirit possession (trans-Caribbean, down into Brazil and Uruguay—that type of thing) and the shamanism I know which is more Amazonian—a different geographical spread.

PLW: Is it your impression that spirit possession is more an African import?

MT: I'm sure that plays a big part, again, the story's very complicated. All I wanted to say is that—although I'm sure you could find plenty of differences and exceptions—my hunch is that there's something about spirit possession which is amicable toward hierarchy, stratification, and maybe even the State. That's got something to do with the role of the dead and invoking the spirit of the past and the dead. The shamanism I know—which of course is only one amongst a zillion—doesn't care much about the dead. If at all. It's a very deeply rooted a-historical approach. Whereas the spirit of the dead is historical in the sense that it deals with the Time-Before of the spirits, the presencing of the Past.

PLW: Let's go back to autobiography. I was interested in hearing about your first ayahuasca (yagé) experiences—whether you intended to do this when you went up into the mountains—were you inveigled into it somehow? Why did you do it? How many times?

MT: One day two peasant revolutionaries invited me to join them—a great honor for me and a great joy: Luis Carlos Mina, and a guy called Alfredo Cortés. They'd both been involved in the peasant syndicates—trade unions if you like—in the sugar mills. Luis Carlos Mina was an ardent peasant cultivator, very skilled, and they were both involved in a growing peasant organization on the national level. This group wanted to build a meeting hall in the main market town—Santander De Quilichao—so that people coming from far away to the Saturday market wouldn't have to sleep on lumps of cardboard in the street or pay for a hotel, but could all sleep and meet in this place, and get down to organizing. So they had to get the building materials. And one way they were going to get them was to ask poor rural people to contribute something. So in the middle range of the moun-

tain, south of the Valley, there was a group of Indians who'd migrated across from the central chain of the Andes, sometime in the 1930's or 40's, and were working as serfs (as I put it) for a relatively poor hacienda owner named Zuñiga. So we stayed at Alfredo's place for the night. I slept with Luis Carlos in a horrid lumpy bed. He had the radio on all night, as often happens in peasant homes in Colombia. He was raffling this radio, taking it round and getting people to buy tickets. So in the morning we get up on these little scrawny ponies (there's a picture in the Shamanism book); we ride up up up up up up. Eventually we get to Zuñiga's place. He's a tough leathery guy, skinny, works with his hands all the time—and he's the "white man." He asks me what I'm doing there and I say, well, I'm writing a history—I'm also a doctor. He asks, can I recommend anything for these stomach pains he suffers from all the time? We talked a bit. He had these stomach ailments all the time, couldn't sleep at night. And when it got really bad he'd go down into the valley, catch the bus south to Pasto, catch another bus, and hang out with some Indians, and they would cure him. And I thought this was the oddest thing I'd ever heard. So a couple of weeks later I was back in the market town, Santander, and met some of the Indians — the serfs—this time drunk and happy—and I said, your boss reckons that he gets ensorcelled—*malificio*—and he goes to these Indians way down in the south in the jungle to get cured. I said, who would be ensorcelling him? They laughed and laughed and said *los mismos compadres*, the parents of the children he's the godfather of. See, what would happen in a hacienda like that, the owner would make himself godfather of the serf's children. So what they meant (behind the smiles) was that he thought *they* were ensorcelling him—us Indians, his slaves, his serfs, and to cure himself he goes to *other* Indians, completely different ones—with feathers and stuff—in the jungle, and gets cured

and comes back. And so my mind was blown open by this. Because if you put it together in the usual mechanical sociological way, here was a guy—not rich—a poor white guy—had a few hundred hectares in the Andes—had three or four Indian families that worked four days a week for him, then he'd let them cultivate for themselves the rest of the week on their own tiny plots—we'd call it feudalism. And he was frightened of Indian witchcraft—because the white guy thinks the Indians have special powers, just like the Indians think the whites have special powers. So he would then go and avail himself of more powerful Indians in the lowland forest to cure himself and come back, and keep pumping, exploiting the system. So that to me was one of the great... an amazing story that in effect is the heart of the Shamanism book.

PLW: And so did you go and seek out these Indians?

MT: The same exact ones? No, but I met several people in the following years who were like Zuñiga—going to the Putamayo to get cured so that they could go back and maintain the exploitive relationships which they felt were causing them sickness.

PLW: So what finally prompted you to go and seek them out?

MT: Immense curiosity.

PLW: Were you acting on information from, say, people like Zuñiga? Such-and-such a village, such-and-such a person?

MT: No! I had an anthropologist friend named June Langdon who told me stories about the Siona of the Putamayo. I also had a friend who was into indigenous native American politics, Scott Robinson, who had done work against the Vietnam War at Cornell, had gone to Ecuador and lived with Kofan Indians up the headwaters of the Putamayo. He got on really well with one particu-

lar group of people, had been given an Indian name, and he gave me a gift to take to some Kofan friends of his. And that was what really got me into it—Scott and his Kofan friends Salvador and Gratulina Moreno.

PLW: And that was where you first tried yagé? Do you remember much about it?

MT: What I do remember is later, with a guy named Santiago Mutumbajoy in Mocoa. He is such a fun person, whereas Salvador was morose and withdrawn and seemed ailing. I can't remember the first time with Salvador too well. Maybe the first time was actually with Santiago Mutumbajoy. I think it was.

PLW: So your first trip wasn't a big revelation then?

MT: It was with Santiago Mutumbajoy. There's a interesting comparison to be made between these two shamans. Unlike his wife Gratulina, Salvador was morose and withdrawn, and very much what I might call, for the sake of discussion, a "purist." He had a yagé hut fairly deep in the forest. You had to be on a diet, stop eating at least 24 hours before—and no way it could be taken if there was a menstruating or pregnant woman close by. A big deal! A lot of taboos surrounded it for him. Interestingly Salvador's father was a rubber tapper—a white man so-called—not an Indian—but his mother was Indian. Later on I met another Kofan shaman called Pacho Quintero, who was slowly dying on another river called the Hormigero. Down from the town of Hormigero. Pacho was described to me as a bad egg, always into sorcery and killing people. When I visited him (an adventure in itself) he disliked white society intensely. A pro-Indian out of *Black Elk Speaks*! A little wizened guy, lived deep in the forest, here he was spouting all this indigenous stuff. And it was all *sui generis*, not like now. Nowadays I advise anyone to be extremely suspicious of pro-Indigenous philosophies put forward by people from the Amazon, because they've been

so thoroughly exoticized now, whether by singers like Sting or Hollywood actresses going down to save the Amazon. All "primitive" people in the world are now aware that they have a special role to play in the western imagination. But this was before that. Pacho was amazing to me. His father was a white rubber tapper. What interested me about both Pacho and Salvador was: here were these hefty ayahuasca shamans, deeply into the purity of the tradition. So many thou-shalt-not's! But they'd both come out of these hybrid marriages. Very interesting to me. I remember Pacho had a son called Benjamin who lived across the river—father and son separated by this small river—and the son had these posters up on his walls about the importance of schooling and whatnot. I remember his father sneering at them and saying, the forest is my school! So if you think tradition comes from being purely Indian, here were these two guys whose fathers were actually whites, yet supported the most extreme traditionalism.

Apropos of nothing much in particular, I must tell you this: It was New Year's Eve, and I was down there with my kid Tico who was about two years old—I was still carrying him around—and Anna—staying with Pacho Quintero. A guy came, a white guy maybe fifty or sixty, wearing rubber boots, looking very haggard, and brought a bottle of aguardiente as a New Year's present. He was German, living there hidden it seemed to me in the Putumayo forest. Later on I learned about this Nazi they were all hunting for—Bormann I think his name was ...

PLW Martin Bormann?! You took ayahuasca with Martin Bormann?

MT: Well, not ayahuasca... but I always wondered! Who the hell was that guy? The Putumayo has some curious people hidden away. Scott told me about the Putumayo, how so many druggies have gone down there. William Burroughs was there,

and this guy Claudio Naranjo who'd written about ayahuasca, a Chilean psychologist who'd studied and taught at Berkeley... Scott says, a large number of people have gone through the Putumayo...

What I wanted to say was, the person I really liked taking yagé with was not Salvador, but the person whom Salvador's wife Gratulina put me on to, she said, O you must go visit Santiago Matumbajoy in Mocoa. I resisted this advice because there I was in the depth of the forest and Mocoa sounded too urban for me. A small country town, very remote from the rest of Colombia—but it was a town. Now admittedly he did live a few miles outside of town—you had to cross this swaying bamboo bridge, he lived in a tiny house on a hill in the forest and so on. But I wanted the real primitive experience, and Mocoa seemed too much like civilization! But Santiago Matumbajoy was—and is—an incredibly funny and fabulous person... I loved him...

PLW: Still alive?

MT: Yes. So my book is basically about my yagé experiences with him. The point I wanted to make: he's certainly "pure" Indian but he speaks Inga (and Spanish), whereas Salvador speaks Kofan (and Spanish). Now the Inganos are easily the largest group of Indians in the Putumayo. They live in the lowlands but also in the highlands in the Sibundoy Valley, and those wandering Indian medicine men I mentioned—they go everywhere, all over Colombia, Panama, Venezuela, Ecuador—you see, they're *all Inganos*. They're like gypsies, these wandering medicine men. And there's another group like that in Bolivia, called the Collahuyas—and these people are fascinating, these people who wander over half the continent...

PLW: Have they been doing it for thousands of years, do you think?

MT Probably a long time. The Sibundoy Valley

forms a sort of natural highway between the highlands and the lowlands of Colombia. The highlanders who do all the wandering claim their power comes from the heavy shamans in the lowlands, who don't travel—people like Santiago Matumbajoy—and there's a lot of tension in that relationship. Another interesting thing about the Inganos: People like Salvador say you have to fast, not eat or drink—but the Inganos don't give a fuck. They say, O yeah that's right, you're not allowed to do this, you're not allowed to do that. But we have a medicine that you can take, and then you can do it! So for every taboo they have a medicine that gives you license to get around the taboo. I really like the Inganos: They can steer around anything with another herb. So that's the fun, the mischief if you like, of the Inganos—especially a guy like Santiago Mutumbajoy. Reading other ethnographies, or talking to people like Salvador, I got the feeling that the Inganos, who are closer to the town, are not familiar or happy with much of the indigenous cosmology. But I say that with some hesitancy because I think anthropologists (especially in those days) have a tendency to over-systematize and make over-elaborate certain so-called indigenous cosmologies. You know they sit there for days, months, years, with their notebooks, gradually filling in the dots—and I'm not sure how much of this is general knowledge and how much is possessed by one particular person or "informant," how much of it is superimposed... So with a guy like Santiago Mutumbajoy, sometimes I would think he was... not secularized but perhaps urbanized or modernized...

PLW: Mostly he used his knowledge to heal?

MT: Yeah. There were things he didn't know about or felt unsure about or didn't know the answer to. But sometimes I'd feel that this was because he was simply more honest than most people.

PLW: Haven't you written somewhere that in the

case of ayahuasca—and other things—“true knowledge” is always *somewhere else*?

MT: Yes, it's like an allegory for knowledge itself.

PLW: So you remember your first trip with Santiago?

MT: Definitely. It's in the book: where he turned into a tiger. And I looked back and I saw this tiger sitting in a hammock. Body of a human and feet and legs in pants, the trunk was in-between, but the head—all these stripes and hair hanging down—a tiger sitting in a hammock. I looked away and it was a shaman; I looked back and it was a tiger. And then I vomited. Vomited like hell. I remember very clearly, that first night. That's what makes me think I probably *hadn't* taken yagé before with Salvador, because he was such a fuss-pot.

PLW: You just couldn't follow all the rules?

MT O well, he didn't have the yagé, or the stars weren't in the right meridian... But later I did take yagé with Salvador, and it was a very moving experience. He would go deep into the forest and make this hut, just a roof with four poles—pretty decent-sized thing, longer than this room—maybe twice as long—thatched...

PLW: For group tripping?

MT: Four or five people.

PLW: And you followed the diet rules?

MT: Just don't eat for 48 hours... You can drink...

PLW: Is it the case that this dieting makes the trip easier? Less shitting and vomiting?

MT: Well, so they say. I'm very bad on the vomiting thing. Lots of pain, like I have a split esophagus. I mean when I vomit it's like everything opens up — really painful. That's one of the reasons I slowed down a bit towards the end. Over the years I've taken a lot of yagé, but I'm scared... When

you're deep in the forest and you feel like your esophagus is going to rupture... no one's going to... you wouldn't survive.

PLW: How many trimes have you done it?

MT: Never kept count. But my guess would be thirty, forty times.

PLW: What's the upshot of this experience of thirty or forty ayahuasca trips? What knowledge did you get, if any? Just stoned? Revelations? Your life changed because of ayahuasca or was it just something you were doing?

MT: I don't know. These are questions I'd just keep asking myself. It would be good now to think back in a concentrated burst. I think I now know more about many things and am better able to digest the experience. So in a way I'm answering your question by saying... There's something behind or to the side of experience, or that's not given in experience. It's a trick. I think now I'd like to think about those experiences *outside* the experiences themselves. All I can remember now is the surprise, the excitement, the viscosity... I suppose it's like a laboratory... or a palette, such as a painter has, of sensations and ideas, half formulated ideas which you can keep returning to and re-arrange in different ways. For example one might try to re-scramble isolated pictures and fragments of pictures versus some fairly smoothly developed plot. The yagé experience is always something you can return to (insofar as you can remember it) to re-think all these very basic questions, because you've been so pulled apart and because such unusual mixtures of sensations have occurred. In part it's like having another sense organ opened up, in addition to having eyes, ears, taste, skin, genitalia—now there's the yagé organ too, and it blasts through consciousness, the exquisite intellectual being of one's self as well.

PLW: Some of these themes you've written about already. Would you say your thinking was *directly* shaped by your ayahuasca experiences? Not just writing *about*, but writing *from*?

MT: God, I'd like to think so. I think the book has a lot of that.

PLW: I think so too, and that's why I'm pressing you on this.

MT: There's an intersection there between the impact of yagé on the one hand, and the sort of style and the problem raised by Walter Benjamin on the other.

PLW: Well, he was using drugs too—and learning from them.

MT: True! But it was more that drugs confirmed his aesthetic-political intuitions and theories (which we could in part, but only in part, trace to Surrealism, Proust, Marx, and Jewish mysticism).



PLW: Let's look at the issue of the, let's say, "escape" of ayahuasca from the jungle into the urban world: should it have ever happened? A theoretical issue of course because it *has* happened—but is it a good thing or a bad thing or don't we know yet? Is there a "proper" way for ayahuasca to enter into our outside urban culture from its inside jungle origin?

MT: I'm dissatisfied with my reaction to this question. I don't like it, and I've felt this for a long time—for twenty or twenty-five years. I remember sitting in Popayan with an old hippie from the United States—I knew nothing about ayahuasca or the Putamayo or anything. I was saying how unpleasant I found the idea of gringos going down into the jungle and taking ayahuasca with the

Indians. This guy gave me, quite rightly I think, a good talking-to, and said in a very relaxed way that he couldn't see anything wrong with that—what was my point?—etc. In a way your question is just an enlargement of that. I find my attitude unpleasant. I've had this same conversation as recently as one month ago again in Popayan, this time at night, at a huge party of mostly young anthropologists (like in their early twenties). They were pressing me on this same question, and finding me hard to follow and conservative.

PLW: Is your dislike inspired by ideas, or is it just visceral?

MT: (laughs) I think it's a visceral dislike. Well, first of all, I think the reason I find myself at odds with myself is that I have to distinguish between an authentic experience and an inauthentic commercialized experience—and I'm suspicious of this dichotomy. I know how easy it is to make it, and I'm frightened of the implications of that sort of distinction. But nevertheless those are my grounds. I like to think there's a less and more commercialized experience, that in the latter people lie or allow their imaginations to float in areas where they wouldn't otherwise—and that's what worries me about it. I find myself caught in a particular kind of way. When I was talking to Santiago Mutumbajoy—about nothing much—I remember a story he told, which I put (very deliberately) into the shamanism book. He said, when he was a young guy and was taking ayahuasca with this shaman and the next shaman and so forth, there was a guy they all respected very much, a small wizened old Indian—Patricio—and they were taking ayahuasca with him. He went round the group asking people what sort of luck or fate they wanted. One person said they wanted magic to make money, another person said he wanted hunting magic. And Patricio said, that's good, this guy is on the right wavelength. And as I'm listening to

Santiago telling the story I'm thinking, yeah right, it's the hunters versus the capitalists, and this old shaman is going to nail this guy who wants money. But the story continues. Patricio says, hunting magic is the best magic because with hunting magic you make money too! So I realized what a prim sort of fellow I was. Here I was dividing the world up, and these Indians were, I think Nietzschean, Dionysian. You can have it all! And what's this stupid hang-up I'm imposing, this line I'm drawing between the money world and the hunting world, the world of the city and the world of the jungle? So I always try to remember this story. I do think that this Dionysian drug-taking thing could transcend all these worlds.

On the other hand I have had experiences. I remember once watching some people prepare for a yagé session in Bogotá. First time I'd ever seen this—late 80's. A friend of mine was involved, an Indian. I just didn't like the look of the whole situation. I excused myself before they even took ayahuasca, this large group of middleclass people who had invited an Indian, who, I thought, didn't seem to know very much—wouldn't be classified as a powerful shaman or important figure in the Putamayo. But he was the best they could get up in Bogotá. No doubt he's conned some cousin into selling him a few gallons of ayahuasca and was going to make a fair amount of money with these people. They took it in the house of a doctor. My feeling was that it would have been unpleasant—only one toilet!—middleclass suburb — chandeliers—thick carpets. And there was this Indian guy sitting on a tiny sofa, barefoot, rolling himself a cigarette, looking incredibly out of place. But nevertheless relaxed and master of the situation, I felt he'd do OK. But I guess I was thinking about the thought-worlds and fantasies that middleclass Bogatanos would bring to this situation. Just as I would, just as I did, and continue to do—but they wouldn't have the depth of experience that I had to

perhaps modify... Now I felt frightened of this, of those projections and desires, those fantasies that the urban people would bring with themselves. If this thing snowballed and got more and more powerful, it seemed to me they would drag the Indian practices in their wake and mold them—in ten, twenty, forty years—and something completely weird would develop. As I think it has—with the Brazilian ayahuasca cults like Santo Daime. I saw a video of that and it freaked me out—it looked very authoritarian, very different—sharp division between the sexes—etc. I can live with that, I can see rationales for that, but there was something about the hierarchical rationalization of what to me was always an informal and joking type semi-religious practice—pushing it toward a kind of cross between the army and the Catholic Church, which I did not like at all.

So there's a deep problem there, trying to understand my own antipathy. It cuts me off from many things. I'd quite like to take ayahuasca up here, upstate New York... but I don't know...

PLW: Whether you'd like to or not wasn't my question so much as whether you think there's any use in other people doing it? In other words, are you willing to grant a "social" aspect to this growing phenomenon of the escape of power plants from their traditional secret hide-aways? One thinks of the rather terrible stories about Maria Sabina, how her life was kind of ruined by Gordon Wasson...

MT: I didn't know that. Tell me.

PLW: Years after she met Wasson she did an interview with a Mexican anthropologist in which she expressed a lot of regret—horrible problems with her family, in the village, etc. She deplored the hippie invasion—even seemed to feel that the mushrooms had lost their power to some extent. I'm sure from a certain point of view she was right—but she wouldn't have been able to see or really judge the value of what had happened outside her

world: a whole generation of people, worldwide, from every walk of life, who have... well, you know, expanded their consciousnesses.

MT: I have two stories here. One is: there is a traditional anthropological take, which sounds a bit glib, that the drug really has meaning within its cultural context, so that to take it into the city or into the United States, etc., is to erase or miss out on that fundamental aspect. Second, one reifies the drug and makes it all-important, whereas for the anthropologist the drug is important but only within its culture, let's say, down there in the Putumayo. That's the classic anthropological take and of course it's got a lot going for it. The other thing I wanted to say is that the son of a Putumayo shaman, whom I've known since he was about fifteen, never showed any real interest in Indian culture—in fact he was sort of embarrassed by it, tried not to look like an Indian, wore western clothes and haircut, never spoke the language except when he was forced to. By the time he was twenty-five or twenty-eight, something had spun 360 degrees in Colombia—a phenomenal thing has happened there. Suddenly Indians are “in.” Before they'd been people to poison with smallpox, drunks, etc. But due to the political mobilization in the central Andes, up high with the Paéz and Guambianos—there were two Indian senators, a political movement, they were taking land back, they were proudly flaunting their language and modes of dress. Amazing. But the white people, the non-Indian city people, had suddenly flipped: they wanted to be Indians too. Everyone was fascinated by the Indians—who form perhaps one percent of the Colombian population—“officially designated Indians,” that is—so the Indians became all the rage, as they did world-wide. Revitalization. What came first, the chicken or the egg? In some ways, the indigenous groups, emboldened by first-world interest in their lives, were able to build their own confidence and then put pressure on the

white societies which — despite contradictions—were now more open to thinking about the Indians in a different way than they had for a very long time. So the son of the shaman was part of that movement. He decided he'd become a shaman. He always like taking yagé. So he started, through this urban nexus, to make connections and get invitations to travel—first I think to Costa Rica—religious seminars, Eastern religion, etc.—then Puerto Rico, then San Francisco, and then New York. When I inquired about him last month in Colombia I was told that his father and mother had moved out of his house because they couldn't stand the tension, and had gone back to the forest. The son had pulled them out of the forest eight years ago when they were attacked (that's another story). But now this very ancient couple have moved back to the forest. Why couldn't they stand the scene in the house? Because with the son's trips away from home, his wife had become attached to another guy in his absences. This guy was getting drunk and beating her—a nasty scene all around. Now it'd be too easy, and smack of something moralistic on my part, to say that I can't help thinking—along the lines of your Maria Sabina story—that it's possible we're seeing the destruction of peoples or sub-cultures, or at least new strains and traumas.

PLW: Suppose we look at this from the point of view of the ayahuasceros, and say—if only as a metaphor—that the plants themselves have an agenda. The spirits have an agenda. Sometimes this has been expressed as the notion that since tribal cultures are in danger of destruction, whether or not they share their secrets, the plants “want” to be released from the jungle (or whatever). I find this intriguing because I've lived through the story myself. As a 60s hippie I would not have had the experiences I had—not even LSD really—if Wasson hadn't gone to Mexico and re-discovered the “lost” plants. The psychedelic movement owed a great deal to Maria Sabina and the shamans of

"other worlds." It had destructive and negative qualities for them—but, hey, also for us! So whether the plants really have an agenda, it's *as if* that were the case—so we might as well accept it and live with it. Part of this is the feedback into indigenous cultures you've described. It was political of course—indigenous pride—but also involved shamanism and plants. For better or for worse? On this basis we could perhaps make judgments about particular events, or pernicious kinds of tourism and fake neo-shamanism.

MT: I agree. There's a way of being "cool" with this, but not many people can see it or be it. The danger would be dishonest cultural interaction. There's a lot of fluidity between... different parts of the world. (I was going to say, between cultures or societies. But those things became hard to define under globalization.) But if you're dealing with people who go around barefoot and grow corn, and may have a television as well, though they don't move much beyond where they live... their sense of humor, their way of understanding, their sense of being in the world, is going to be very different from yours and mine. They take this drug together (usually men far more than women) that potentiates and accelerates their perceptions, visions, dream life, fears. You'd think there'd be an enormous rift, or difference anyway, between these peoples. It's difficult to see how there could be a meshing between us. Apart from that, so much of this drug experience—ayahuasca—depends on unknown components (for Indians as for non-Indians). It seems to me the non-Indians, especially the urban middleclass, Latin American, European, North American, will elaborate incredible fantasies about the powers of shamans, coherent qualities of cosmologies, etc. For me that's where the principal damage is done: in constructing (as anthropologists do, perhaps with more caution, but equally guilty) an "Indian culture" by which to make sense of their drug experiences.

That causes me a great deal of anxiety and anger.

PLW: Is it doomed to be a negative transfer? Can't there be mutual enhancement? What about the "engaged" anthropologists? The "advocates"? True reciprocity? For the sake of argument I'll say you seem not to have considered the positive possibilities of cultural transfer, which can work both ways.

MT: I can see attempts at economic protection, efforts to stimulate political power—but in both those situations it seems that what I would consider fun and important about culture is going to be destroyed. Whether you get economically ripped off or economically supported by new institutions it's a new ball game. Something will be radically changed. Maybe this just to say that everything gets plowed under as time goes by.

PLW: Then isn't anthropology "guilty" too?

MT: Not really. A very few anthropologists, writing their little monographs and articles, but if we're talking about, say institutional attempts to help Indian tribes retain "ownership" of their own knowledge—institution building, albeit for defense or resistance—once a culture is put in a self-conscious defensive mode, it's destroyed. I don't want to argue against it, because the destruction will happen for other reasons as well. Perhaps I see it as a no-win situation. Maybe one way is marginally better than the other, but that's all.

PLW: Fifty years or so ago people believed that indigenous cultures were doomed. It was an emergency: Knowledge had to be rescued before modernity crushed it. Now instead we see a paradoxical revitalization of indigenous cultures—thanks in part to the impetus from the outside. True?

MT: Um, tough situation. Reminds me of discussions that have been going on in anthropology for a few years now. Like Marshall Sahlín's argument that due to globalization and *against* globalization there's a revitalization of indigenous cultures world-wide. That modernization really means indigenization. I'm very sympathetic to this argument and wish it were true, but my feeling is that it's fake indigenization, totally fake, that's what scares me. And you'll hear it every time, Peter, in the singing.

PLW: Aren't you perhaps fetishizing "purity"?

MT: Yes, that's where we started this conversation! I realize I've painted myself into a corner where I see "authentic" and "inauthentic" cultures, and I don't like it! However, this distinction is precisely what gets exacerbated by globalization. More than exacerbated. Before the issue was the life or death of the indigenous people. Now it's their "authenticity." In the Putumayo, incidentally, Indians were killed during the rubber boom (1900-1920) as the racial Other. Now the whites go to the Indian for hallucinogenic healing! You have to understand these as two sides of the one coin.

PLW: We no longer believe in pure *unchanging* primitive culture, do we?

MT: That's true. But there's a world of difference between the changes in the indigenous societies around 1850 and the changes now in the year 2000. Prior to the colonization Australian aboriginal society—for instance—changed in many ways and accepted influences from many different directions—natural phenomena, Indonesia, etc.—but nothing on the scale that's happening now. Especially when cultures are subject to intense destruction, as happened in Australia well into the 1950s—the government taking aborigine children away (children who looked "white")—that sort of shit—incredible purposive destruction and elimination of aboriginal culture. Now all that's swiveled

round—hugely polemical politics about it—but nevertheless a widespread movement that these cultures are good things and should be preserved. Well, that has its own colossally destructive risks as well, right?

PLW: But looking at it from the point of view of tribal people (if possible): what other hope exists? They can't say, sorry, we're going back to 1700! We all assume there's no turning back the clock. (I'd like to think of an argument against this cliché some day, but let's take it for granted.)

MT: Let me say this, in agreement with the point you're arguing: it seems to me that in a country like Colombia there could be a kind of de-bourgeoisification of mainstream society. That seems important. Take the issue of imprisonment as punishment under "Western" law, all over the world. In the highlands of Colombia the CRIC Indian movement (if that's what it's still called) doesn't like imprisonment—they think it's inhuman and ineffective. They prefer to whip people or put them in stocks. (Spanish Colonial practice amalgamated with certain Indian ideas. Stocks are not an Indian idea as far as I know.) This takes us into the territory Foucault opened up: Enlightenment versus pre-Enlightenment ideas of punishment in France. I myself tend to think whipping and stocks would be far better than imprisonment. That's my own personal view. I'd advocate something like that myself.

PLW: If it were you being punished you'd prefer it?

MT: Sure. We know prisons are unbelievable hell-holes, warehouses of people, etc. I offer this as an example, a parallel of the ayahuasca situation.

The other thing I'd like to think about is trying to take the focus away from preservation or authenticity, and instead trying to think about the possible impact on mainstream society. As with gypsies, the lumpen proletariat experience, hobos (in the

US), the future contribution of indigenous people will be a murky urban fringe-dweller consciousness—which will never really be accessible to mainstream society. I'm aware of the dangers of romanticizing this. But what will happen, or has already happened to the indigenous people, is that they will live in the cracks between bureaucracies, by the sides of highways and railroad tracks. One can't predict the future but I suspect this is the reality we're talking about. For me in the 60s a lot of the associations with drugs were not with indigenous people but with urban subculture that was used to marijuana or cocaine from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. People forced to live off their wits in desperate circumstances in urban America rather than untroubled primitives in Mother Nature. It always seemed to me that this was the central component of drug culture.

PLW: Romanticism isn't necessarily a bad thing. In the 60s we romanticized the figure of the Indian as a defeated hero because we felt defeated ourselves. And despite all the bullshit and fluff and "appropriation" I still believe that this brush with shamanism may be the one positive thing we can sift out of the detritus of the 60s.

MT: A couple of things pop to mind as you speak. One: the most naïve remark of the century: there's a huge amount of drug taking in the western world. Not in my immediate circle. I was drinking a cup of coffee two months ago in Manhattan, outside, must've been Spring, a few moments to kill. A yuppie sits down, apparently just arrived in New York, has a date with some girl; within three minutes he's talking about all the drugs he's got, going to take over the weekend. I pick up the impression from my children's friends that America's awash with teenagers taking drugs. I say to myself, get real! This quasi-shamanic thing is just around the corner or already exists. But what shape does it take? I don't want to say that people in New Jersey

suburbs who take drugs simply can't possibly have the same kind of experience as shamans—that it's "mere individualism" or totally self destructive. But drugs are here and they're going to stay for a long long time. There must be some very inventive teenagers out there doing amazing things with them. How might we even begin to talk about this using the inventiveness and experiments of indigenous practices in South America as a very rough guide? Contrast and comparison could be helpful, even neat. To that extent I agree with you.

Another thing: to return to the Nietzschean/Dionysan question: I remember being taken to visit some curandero in Central Mexico by a middleclass friend of mine in the 1970s. She had some personal troubles and was consulting this guy constantly. He wasn't a drug user as far as I know. So the first thing he says to her is, "Well, *comadre*, we have to know the difference between our friends and our enemies." I'd been reading Mao Tse Tung at that time and was tickled by this!—this very calm political statement about how to deal with misfortune in one's life, how things never seem to go right, hang-ups, depressions as we'd call them in western terms. Then I think of drug taking (*yagé*) in the Putumayo. A certain level of bawdiness, of rascally humor, passions about murder, fears of being killed or wanting to kill while taking the *yagé*—all that sort of stuff—seem so far removed from our experience. This mixture of pragmatic everyday even economic interests with, I think, a sort of poetry and ecstasy. That's what's so hard in the west (or at least for me) to tinker with or to figure out. Because I immediately tend to dichotomize and ask how these two aspects can co-exist. But that's the only way I can get the problem across to myself or you. A philosophical problem if you like, or a problem of interpretation. So much of what we might try to learn from indigenous people about drugs is not going to make it through, because we can't deal with that mixture of toughness and tenderness. An

insuperable barrier. It's probable that in our jokes and everyday speech we handle all this OK, but when we sit down and try to analyze it we find that as intellectuals we haven't got the machinery.

PLW: After all, on the one hand you have societies that've socialized these plants for—let's say — thousands of years. No repression, no "law". On the other hand: a society that has known such plants for a century or less, is far too technologically brilliant for its own good, and is hysterically repressed. Perhaps if we survive a thousand years or so these matters will work themselves out. If we're not undergoing the End of History now, the plants will have a role to play. It's intriguing that they're illegal. It shows that real power is at stake.

MT: How much of the repression is due to the plant itself, and how much to the association with the indigenous culture?

PLW: Largely the latter, I suppose. Most illegal drugs come from "non-white" cultures. Come to think of it, so do most legal domesticated drugs like coffee, tea, tobacco, chocolate.

MT: How much of that repression arises from the diminution of *carnival* (in Bakhtin's sense) in western culture?

PLW: A tremendous amount, I'm sure.

MT: I'd like to draw our attention to a carnivalesque quality, the ability to enjoy the fiesta. It's present in Colombia amongst poor whites, and perhaps not-so-poor whites as well. I was present just a few weeks ago at a festival for the Virgin of Rosario, on the Pacific coast. Three days! People sleep on the floors and expect to get up and dance for three days straight, and dance and drink, and drop down drunk, and get up again. Food was amazing in quality and quantity, it never stopped. I don't know anyone in the US who would come to a house with their sleeping bag and then party for three days, old and young together. Music! disc

jockeys, CDs up the kazoo—on the Pacific coast of Colombia, a million miles from anywhere. Suzuki generators, palm trees covered with papier maché, platform on the sand for dancing, boats to take the Virgin out into the ocean to the three neighboring communities and back again. The problem with what I'm saying is this: I don't think the ability to space out, to become ecstatic, to be carnivalesque, has disappeared in the West. Nevertheless, *nevertheless*, I do think... I'm partial to the argument that something basic has dropped out of the western ability to experience.

PLW: Like Halloween, which always threatens to get out of hand, out of control, in our society. On the one hand, "disturbances" are severely repressed; on the other hand, there's intense commercialization: two forms of control.

MT: And when people do become carnivalesque, they often do so in grotesque destructive stupid asshole macho violent ways.

PLW: We don't live in a carnivalesque society, so when it appears under repression it takes negative forms.

MT: I remember a one-line remark in a book by Irving Goldman, *The Cubeo*, an extremely good book based on field work in the Vaupes region of the Amazon, around the time of the Second World War. He doesn't talk much about drugs but at one point he does discuss the yagé experience as something that people don't do for pleasure. He says, I know of no one who took these drugs for pleasure but for the intensity of the experience. Or words to that effect. Heart-wrenching experiences taken to the limit of endurance. I'm sure it has aspects we'd call pleasurable—but it has something else as well, important to contemplate. A lot of people wouldn't like ayahuasca, a drug that induces vomiting and defecation and nausea. Synthetic drugs eliminate and side-step all this. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? To what degree can the West handle drug

experiences *if* something has happened to what we're calling the ability to enjoy and participate in fiesta, in carnival? Taking a leaf out of Goldman's book we could say, let's not forget that the pleasure is a very complicated pleasure. It has pain attached to it. It even involves bodily destruction.

I'd like to add this: I used the words fiesta and carnival but I'd like simply to mention the ability to get together in a group—two, three, up to twenty people let's say—maybe eight or ten—and have a conversation that can go on for several hours—ripples of humour—some sort of orchestration but without a leader...

PLW: On yagé?

MT: Without yagé. And *then* you take yagé, you add it to that capacity. Not just indigenous people. I find it in Colombia amongst people of all walks of life, middle class, lower middle class, urban, rural—but I don't find it so much in the US. The reasons are obscure and complex. I don't want to speculate. But I'm considering the capacity of a small group of people to spin yarns and enjoy storytelling, usually humorous but also philosophical in its way. Conversation.

PLW: Good point. What's lacking in our society seems to be perhaps a certain seriousness—call it "entheogenic ceremonialism." But you've put it better by simply emphasizing the way a group of people interacts. Perhaps we need to be more serious in order to gain the right to such social or even carnivalesque warmth.

MT: I think of the speed-up (I know its sounds simplistic), the speed which we need to get from point A to point B. Then I think of the people I know in Colombia, writers, small businessfolk, academics, peasants, fishermen, goldminers—a pretty wide range. Life there is definitely slower. There's something seductive about the speed, of say, New York City. All my friends... I get into it too...

PLW: "Busy."

MT: The motor is revved up. It's like a drug...



PLW: Well, let's start moving toward closure here or we'll have too much material. Any other points you wanted to bring up?

MT: One important thing with ayahuasca is *nausea*. Nobody's talked about it much. It's responsible, I think for a lot of the sorcery and paranoid images—a queasy sort of dis-ease or unease in one's stance or being-in-the-world. Perhaps it provides some privileged insight into the being of beings? The unpleasantness is seen as a stepping-stone to pleasure or pretty colors or enlightenment—but there's no doubt you could associate the nausea with the macabre and scary sides of the yagé trip. Actually there's probably a perfect correlation. I can't understand the resistance to talking about that.

PLW: What about the shamans? Do they say it's important to go through all the shitting and puking?

MT: No, they'd probably think it pretentious to say anything like that. It's taken for granted. Laughed at. Puke jokes!

Another point: What new shapes might be taken by these yagé visions? I worked with people who didn't have the cosmological patterns that you read about in anthropology, say amongst the Siona or further downriver, or in the Vaupes region. I was living with the Inganos, the ones who have all the ways of avoiding taboos. Getting back to your question about "cultural transfer" I think the Inganos could be the ones to make great contributions to the modern world—more so in my opinion than the more "pure" Indians, or the "great

thinkers" amongst the pure Indians, with whom the anthropologist makes contact and walks away with what looks like an authentic intact vision or cosmology. That's one reason why my shamanism book may be of interest—because it deals with people who, from a traditional social-science point of view, would be seen as having suffered a discontinuity with tradition. Like the famous image of the bricoleur that Levi-Strauss discusses, the person who fabricates out of shreds and patches. I think the Inganos have probably always been shreds-and-patches people. That's why their language is the most commonly used in the region. Probably for centuries they've been bricoleurs, working between cultures. The fact that they have drugs to counteract transgressions of the taboos would also be a part of this complex. I see them as being able, like modernist artists in western Europe, to make great contributions to modern or post-modern culture at the end of the twentieth century.

PLW: One last question. When you got back from Colombia you told me on the phone that one of the things that seemed different to you was how wide-spread ecological consciousness had become. And I asked, "You mean among the intellectuals?" And you said, "No, no, normal ordinary folks, all walks of life." So just at the last moment I'd like to tie our themes—ayahuasca and shamanism—together with this ecological consciousness. Do you see a relation here?

MT: I didn't visit the Putamayo this time...

PLW: I mean on a world-wide level.

MT: I found that the Indians I lived with in the Putamayo were very un-ecological. They'd chop down a tree to get some nuts off the top of it rather than climb it. They'd throw baby diapers into the stream running into the next house. Fuck the people living half a mile down. They'd shit in the streams and so forth. They would've been completely bamboozled by people writing about Indians

living in harmony with nature. All that stuff I think is crap. It was simply the fact that Indians were a small population in such huge jungles and forests; it didn't matter if they cut down all the trees around them. They weren't using chemicals. But you could go down there in the 80s and see people like my dear shaman friend Santiago Matumbajoy ordering people working on his farm to use chemical sprays, and explaining to me how much cheaper it was than doing the work with a hoe. I'm scornful of the notion of some in-built wisdom about the environment, or what we might call ecological sensitivity on the part of indigenous people. This is somewhat irreverent I admit. *But*—somehow, for reasons never clear to me, there is a diffuse movement in Colombia (and therefore I'd imagine elsewhere as well) which is inculcating a sort of P.C. ecological consciousness. I'm flabbergasted. I think partly it's entered into the discourse of the State, and the State is all-fucking-mighty powerful. Especially at the level of the word—the bureaucratic word. Thousands and millions of regulations and additions and changes to regulations. And somehow the consciousness has spread—that it's wrong to chop down the trees at the headwaters of rivers because you can affect the erosion, the volume of water, purity. It's wrong to kill the females of a particular species of animal. It's wrong to use *barbasco* poison to fish in the rivers. Wrong to use dynamite in the rivers (as everyone did) because there'll be no fish for so many years, decades. I'm talking about two regions in particular. One would be in the agribusiness regions, people who work in towns and just outside the towns, peasants surrounded by huge agribusiness concerns and more recently multinational factories. And there the ecological concerns are intense and people use them to combat and get better deals from the multinationals. Saving and protecting the environment is up there on an equal par with the demand for jobs. It sounds like I was going to say that people are cynically or

instrumentally playing the ecological card to get deals. But I don't see a contradiction. I don't want to say it's cynical. Peasants I've been working with in these areas are now able to use the argument for reforestation of the headwaters as a way of stimulating so-called traditional peasant agriculture, which was arboreal. Cacao trees, coffee, fruit trees, timber, a three-dimensional agriculture based on much more intricate and complex cropping patterns than the U.S. Midwest (or European) ideal of eliminating the forest and putting down corn, cotton, sugarcane, rice, as monocrop—as has happened with all of the good flatland in Colombia. And here were these peasants, both during and after slavery, using a three-dimensional tree culture, as I call it. Fascinating, wonderful. So there the ecological movement goes hand in glove with a way of protecting and furthering a way of life opposed to the landless laborer, the urban unemployed, etc. Then you go to the Pacific coast—totally remote—huge tracts of forest (like the Amazon). On the rivers I discovered the same thing, and I couldn't believe it, it's all happened within a decade. You think attitudes are so hard to change and you're generally right. But it's like wildfire. It's like a secular religion—and at the risk of sounding like an airhead I'll say that it touched the truly basic ideas of what constitutes a person, or an animal, or the land. It has to, right? To catch on like that. Something has touched a nerve that was exposed.

PLW: And do you think that all this has anything to do with *indigenismo* and shamanism?

MT: It's possible. Certainly the two things have coincided in time.

PLW: I know you don't want to sound like an a fatuous optimist, but don't you see something positive here?

MT: Definately. It's the greatest thing. I couldn't believe what I heard in 1999. I was totally pessimistic. Downhill all the way. I was fucking

amazed to come across these attitudes in the agribusiness areas—a possibility of turning things around. I was excited, I've got to tell you. That's why I thought, the ecological issue is powerful. It's operating at state level, they've got into the state and have begun to turn things round. Silly things like Foucault's "discourse" really began to make sense to me when I looked at the paperwork and talked to people who deal with the bureaucracy. When they go into those bureaucratic meetings, when they go to the Governor of the State, the huge fucking bureaucracy that deals with the environment—they know how to talk the language, the language that has now become so important. It's much more impressive than what I've seen in the US. And I told you, didn't I, about the guerilla pamphlet I came across (dated 1998), a pamphlet being handed out in the forested areas of the Cordillera, where there's a fairly rapid colonization by poor whites, coming down the mountains, mixing with poor blacks who've been there for two or three hundred years, and have completely different ideas about roads, and farming. And this two-page leaflet from the Farc guerilla says you can't cut trees for profit, only to build a home or furniture; anyone found logging will be fined and the fine will go into the community treasure chest. You can't dynamite for fish. You can't cut forest to cultivate coca. Amazing. So obviously the easy equation between Farc and coca (which is true enough in certain areas) is not true for this one. So like most things in Colombia it gets complicated. It's hard to make any general statement. Now the Farc are known as authoritarian assholes and puritans. But I had not realized that they were *also* into environmentalism. It's happening on all sides. Whether the multinationals can be forced into obeying as well is of course another question. But the fact that even ordinary people are enthused is unbelievable to me. Can you imagine it happening here?



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Michael Taussig with Don Pedro in the healer's garden of delights, 1977.

Michael Taussig first visited the Putumayo region of the Colombian Amazon in 1972 and has returned almost annually since 1976 to drink yagé (the hallucinogenic vine ayahuasca) by the Mocoa River with his shaman friend, the late Santiago Mutumbajoy.

Medical doctor, professor of performance studies, and now anthropologist at Columbia University in New York, Taussig's writings on ayahuasca are notable for his sense of theater no less than of the magic that colonialism bestows upon the shaman, thereby magnifying to dizzying heights the mystical powers of the drug.

Taussig's books include *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism* (1980); *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* (1987); *The Nervous System* (1990); *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993); *The Magic of the State* (1997); and *Defacement* (1999).

Michael Taussig grew up in Australia, and now lives in High Falls, New York. He is currently working on a diary he kept in Colombia in May, 2001, recording the impact of paramilitarism on one small town (forthcoming as *Law in a Lawless Land*).